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SUBJECT: GUINEA PRESENTS ELECTIONS BUDGET, CALLS FOR DONOR SUPPORT

REFTEL: CONAKRY 00158

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The GoG held a formal meeting with the international donor community on March 6 in order to distribute its proposed elections budget. While some of the line items still raise questions, the overall budget appears to be relatively realistic and a significant improvement over the previous proposal. However, the GoG is planning to fund only one-third of the total \$27.5 million cost of elections and is still facing a funding gap of \$8.5 million, after factoring in known donor commitments. GoG ministers repeatedly emphasized the government's strong political will to organize transparent, credible elections, yet the GoG spent more to send its soccer team to the Africa Cup than it is proposing to spend on elections. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Ambassador Carter participated in a widely attended March 6 donor meeting with Guinean Government officials to discuss the GoG's proposed budget and general progress towards the country's delayed legislative elections, now scheduled for late November/early December 2008. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kabele Camara; the Minister of Interior and Security (MIS), Beau Keita; and the Minister of Justice and Human Rights, Paulette Kourouma, represented the GoG. A representative from the Ministry of Finance was also present, as was the MIS Secretary General and other GoG officials. Ben Sekou Syllah, President of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) participated as well. The donor community was represented primarily at the ambassadorial level and included the UN, the EU, France, China, ECOWAS, Germany, Spain, Saudi Arabia, and the Ukraine. USAID Director and Poloff, along with two LES staff, accompanied Ambassador Carter. This meeting was the second such meeting on elections held with the international donor community; the first was in September 2007.

A LOOK AT THE NUMBERS

¶3. (U) While waiting for the meeting to begin, the GoG provided delegations with copies of the proposed elections budget. The total proposed budget for the CENI was a little over 15 billion GnF (\$3.6 million), which is in line with what Ben Syllah privately told Ambassador Carter on February 22 (reftel). The MIS proposed budget totaled 96.2 billion (\$22.5 million), but included the costs of revising the electoral list, which the EU has already committed to covering. Outside of this expense, the largest proposed expenditure is for 11.5 million voter ballots at a cost of over \$4 million. While sitting with fellow diplomats, Ambassador Carter questioned the need for that many ballots given the relatively small number of eligible voters. The EU Ambassador said that the elections require two separate ballots, one for the national list and one for the local contests, and that there are at least five million eligible voters.

¶4. (U) Later, during the formal meeting headed by the GoG, budget summaries were passed out. The figures for the CENI included the \$3.6 million proposed by Ben Syllah under the line item "CENI election," but there was an additional \$1.3 million listed for "CENI operations." Syllah's original budget proposal included CENI

operations so it is unclear where this second amount came from. The budget listed the total cost of elections as \$27.5 million, of which the GoG committed to provide \$9.2 million (about one-third of the total cost). However, the GoG's contribution is dedicated almost exclusively to the MIS, with only \$117,233 reserved for the CENI. After listing confirmed donor community contributions, which include \$6.2 million from the EU/UNDP; \$500,000 from ECOWAS, \$147,000 from France, and an additional \$2.9 million from the EU, the estimated budgetary gap was listed as \$8.5 million. However, the budget does not yet reflect \$774,000 in USG support for the CENI and the MIS, which will be provided through our implementing partner, IFES. It also does not reflect the proposed \$2 million in Democracy Assistance funds for FY08 that Post plans to use for the elections.

WE WILL HAVE TRANSPARENT, CREDIBLE ELECTIONS!

15. (U) The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kabele Camara, formally opened the meeting with some brief comments, including a statement of GoG interest in keeping international partners informed on elections progress, and then turned the microphone over to the Minister of Interior and Security, Beau Keita. Keita spoke at some length as he summarized general elections preparation activities over the last year, beginning with the decision to halt elections and wait for the CENI. Both ministers emphasized that the elections are a high priority and that the government is committed to holding transparent, credible elections in 2008.

16. (U) Ben Syllah also provided a brief update on recent CENI activities. He noted that he already has organizational teams deployed in the interior and that he expects to name local electoral commissions by March 18. Syllah said that he wants to have them in place as soon as possible in order to provide adequate time to train

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commission members and then conduct a comprehensive civic education campaign well in advance of the actual elections. Syllah added that his personal goal is to ensure that at least 25% of commission members are women and that he recommends "massive participation" by the nation's youth.

17. (U) One ambassador asked why the CENI's budget was included in the final GoG budget. Both ministers were quick to assure the assembly that the CENI is an independent institution and will have complete budgetary autonomy. Ben Syllah stepped in and said that the CENI and the MIS agreed to combine the budgets as a sign of collaboration and the fact that the elections will be co-managed. Minister Keita echoed Ben's sentiment, adding that putting the budgets together helps avoid duplication of effort. Syllah noted that the substantial equipment purchases for this election are not a one-time expense as they will be used for future elections as well. He said that the equipment will be collected and stored after the elections.

18. (U) Referring to an MIS line item of \$735,000 for Guinea's overseas voters, the UN Resident Representative asked how the absentee voting process would work and be monitored, as well as how the voter registration kits would be disseminated to embassies. Minister Keita emphasized that all Guinean citizens have the right to vote, including those living overseas, and will be able to participate. He said that each of Guinea's embassies abroad will administer the ballots and that the Ambassador will hold electoral authority equal to that of a prefect or governor. Keita added that the supplier will deliver the voter registration kits directly to Guinea's overseas missions.

19. (U) Another ambassador asked about what had happened to the \$3.9 million that the GoG had allocated in FY2007 for elections. The representative from the Ministry of Finance said that according to Guinean finance law, the money had to be spent before the end of 2007. Since the elections did not take place, the funds were not utilized. They did not carryover into FY08.

110. (U) The French Director for Cooperation asked whether the gap in financing would affect implementation of the elections

chronogram. Ministers Camara and Keita agreed that delays in funding could pose problems and Minister Camara asked that donor community countries confirm their financial commitments as soon as possible in order to avoid any delays.

THE BALL IS IN YOUR COURT

¶11. (U) As questions died down, the Minister of Foreign Affairs took the microphone for some closing comments. He stressed that the GoG has demonstrated clear political will and that everybody wants transparent elections as quickly as possible. "We will have a chronogram soon and we will have elections in December," the minister said. He noted that countries such as Mali, Sierra Leone, and Togo have been able to hold effective, transparent elections and Guinea plans to do the same. As parting words, Minister Camara looked at the assembled donor community and said "the ball is in your court now and we need you to react quickly."

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) While the budget contains some discrepancies and appears to be inflated, it is still relatively realistic and a significant improvement over the first proposed budget. However, it does need to detail the budgetary shortfalls by line item, accounting for all donor contributions, in order to facilitate additional assistance. The GoG's failure to cough up the funds, especially for the CENI, for what should be its number one policy priority is deeply disappointing. Guinea spent more to send its soccer team to the Africa Cup than it is proposing to spend on elections. The GoG is clearly waiting for the international community to come up with the difference and is likely to delay elections preparations until all the financing is in place.

¶11. (SBU) The issue of absentee voters could pose challenges, especially with respect to oversight. It is unclear as to how many Guinean citizens are living abroad, but it is a significant number, although whether or not they would actually report to their embassy and vote is another question. Absentee ballots could serve as a mechanism for delaying announcing elections results, which opens the door to fraud. While the CENI plans to establish mechanisms for elections oversight abroad, it will likely be difficult for the Commission to effectively extend its reach.

END COMMENT.

CARTER